



# Traffic Tech

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## **Evaluation Of A Classroom Alternative To The Traditional Sanction of A Fine For Occupant Protection Violators**

A program implemented by the Arlington, Texas Police Department has resulted in a substantial increase in restraint law enforcement activity. The program consists of a class alternative to the usual sanction of a fine. Occupant protection citations have increased from around 200 per month before the program began to around 800 per month following program implementation.

The occupant protection program was developed through the efforts of the Arlington Police Department (APD) in cooperation with the Arlington municipal court system. It provides for an alternative to the usual sanction of a \$50 fine. Specifically, offenders cited for violation of the Texas mandatory safety belt use law (MUL) are given the option of attending a two hour occupant protection class rather than pay a \$50 fine. Cost of the class is \$10. Offenders can only attend the class one time, and subsequent restraint violations result in a \$50 fine.

The class content is based upon material used in the occupant protection usage and enforcement class taught at the U.S. Department of Transportation Traffic Safety Institute. All class instructors are uniformed APD law enforcement officers. Classes are offered four nights a week from Monday through Thursday and on Saturday, and some classes are taught in Spanish. Failure to attend class, if the class option is chosen, results in issuance of a bench warrant.

### **Study Design:**

The Texas Transportation Institute, Human Factors Division, Texas A&M University conducted the evaluation of the APD occupant protection program. The purpose of the evaluation was to: (1) measure changes in restraint citation activity levels by the APD before and after program implementation; (2) measure changes in attitudes and knowledge of class participants from preclass to postclass and at six month follow-up; (3) compare profiles of violators who selected the class option to those who elected to pay the fine; and (4) compare subsequent restraint violations of those who took the class to those who did not.

### **Major Evaluation Results:**

- o Approximately 7,000 offenders have attended the educational alternative class since it began in February, 1988. Approximately 50% of those issued restraint citations choose to take the class.

- o There were positive attitude and knowledge changes among class participants from preclass to postclass tests. In the six month follow-up survey, most of the preclass to postclass positive gains were still present.
- o The six month follow-up survey revealed a significant increase in the number of class participants who claimed that they always or almost always wore a safety belt. When the respondent was the driver, the increase was from 52.5% at preclass to 83.4% at six months postclass. When the respondent was a passenger, the increase was from 43.9% to 75.7%.
- o A profile comparison was conducted between offenders who elected to attend the class and those who chose to pay the fine. The comparison indicated that those who attended the class were less likely to have had crash involvements than those who did not attend. Also those who attended the class were less likely to have had previous violations than those who did not attend. Females were more likely to attend the class than males. The age distribution was fairly similar for both groups.
- o Of those who attended the class, 3.9% received another MUL citation during a 13 month tracking period. Of those who chose to pay the fine and not attend the class, 8.5% were cited again for a MUL violation within 13 months.
- o The provision of an educational alternative had a significant effect on the number of MUL citations issued by the Arlington, Texas Police Department. MUL citations increased from around 200 per month before implementation of the project to over 800 per month after the project began. This level of enforcement activity has been sustained.

### **Conclusions**

The occupant protection program developed by the Arlington, Texas Police Department is an excellent example of a local initiative that has proven to be highly successful. The program has produced a substantial increase in occupant restraint enforcement activity. Furthermore, the increase in enforcement activity has been sustained. The results of preclass and postclass testing and a six month follow-up survey showed that there were significant attitude and knowledge gains among class participants. Also class participants were less likely to receive a subsequent MUL citation than violators who chose not to attend the class. While the impetus for the program came from the APD, the cooperation of the municipal court system was necessary in order to provide the class alternative.

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